Power Struggle over Ukraine: Systemic Observations

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The Syrian civil war and now Ukraine. These are only two examples of crises over which the United States and Russia have bumped heads recently. Some might be tempted to call this a “new Cold War,” but it’s really not. Yes, the geopolitical competition and power struggle might be obvious and similar. And even the race for maximizing the spheres of influence. But the ideological context is different and therefore there is no clash of politico-economic systems, not to mention that calling the current international system “bipolar” is simplistic, to say the least. What we have now is a primarily intra-systemic, capitalist, geo-economic competition fuelled and exacerbated by identity politics, history and national security considerations.

This reality calls for a re-evaluation of the nature of the contemporary international system and the role of nation-states within it. Starting with the former, there is an ongoing debate about whether we live in a unipolar, a multipolar, a non-polar, or a uni-multipolar international system. Each of these characterizations expresses how much power and influence the US has in relation to other great powers. In the 1990s, right after the end of the Cold War, the international system was indisputably unipolar, with the US being not only the dominant but also the only superpower with unmatched material and ideological capabilities. Things today might appear to be the same, but they are not. The change lays not so much in the capabilities of the US but in their relation to the capabilities of the rest of the world.

It is commonly argued that American power has been declining for the past 10 years or so. There are three oft-cited reasons for this: i) the Afghanistan war (2001), ii) the Iraq war (2003), and iii) the global economic crisis (2007/08). All three factors have contributed to the erosion of the US global power through massive military expenditures abroad and domestic economic losses. As Fareed Zakaria writes:

“During the course of the [Iraq] war, the United States was overextended and distracted, its army stressed, its image sullied. Rogue states like Iran and Venezuela and great powers like Russia and China took advantage of Washington’s inattention and bad fortunes. And now, to a significant extent, Afghanistan has taken the place of Iraq. The familiar theme of imperial
In this context, many see this decline as the beginning of the end of American supremacy, others disagree. The fact of the matter is that, at least for now, the US, despite bearing huge losses in military and economic capabilities, is still resilient. Zakaria reminds us that America still dominates at all levels: military, economic and technological while noting that the Iraq war “did not bankrupt the United States. The war has been expensive, but the price tag for Iraq and Afghanistan together – 125$ billion a year at its peak – represents less that 1 percent of GDP. Vietnam, by comparison, cost 1.6 percent of American GDP in 1970 and tens of thousands more soldiers’ lives.”

Other authors agree that the age of America is not over; some even think that the 21st century is going to be America’s century. Indeed, hard evidence shows that “The United States remains by far the most powerful country but in a world with several other important great powers and with greater assertiveness and activity from all actors.” And this is the important point to remember; a fourth factor, if you will, that adds to the shifting dynamics of the international system. In other words, American wars abroad and financial setbacks alone cannot account for an international system that moves towards – but haven’t still reached – multipolarity; the rise of other powers needs to be taken into account as well. Perhaps even more important is the extent to which the US can influence, deter, or coerce these rising great powers. In this regard, the example of Syria and Ukraine in particular, is telling and arguably demonstrates the limits of American supremacy as well as the new international power dynamics.

A phone call between Obama and Putin about the crisis in Ukraine is said to have lasted 90 minutes. During that phone call Obama essentially threatened Putin with sanctions and international isolation if Russia does not withdraw its troops from Crimea and continues to violate international law. Putin did not hesitate to stand his ground saying that Russia has the right to “protect its interests and Russian-speaking populations” in Ukraine. This is a déjà vu of 2008 when Russia sent troops into Georgia under the pretext of aggression against South Ossetians but in reality due to Western and NATO’s efforts for eastward expansion. So, how global is the US power, really?

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2 Ibid., 198-200.
Much to the point, Mearsheimer argues that the US is an *insular* power, as opposed to a *continental* one. That means that “it is the only great power in the Western Hemisphere,” which is perhaps the only Hemisphere that it could really control. To be an insular power, according to Mearsheimer, is to be “much less vulnerable to invasion” due to “the stopping power of water.” Contrary, continental powers, such as Russia are more vulnerable to invasions - an observation that agrees with the historical record. Yet at the same time, the “stopping power of water” also poses limitations to a state’s power-projection capabilities and the exertion of influence and control. Mearsheimer argues that overseas offensive endeavors, against well-defended powers, are “ambitious assaults” which are “rarely possible.” Reversely, in the same way that continental (great) powers are more vulnerable to invasions, the regional or inter-regional projection of their capabilities - be it military or otherwise - is much easier, possible and effective. This has been demonstrated in the Georgia example, in the Syrian civil war through the Iranian proxy, and in the unfolding Ukrainian crisis.

It is evident that despite its supremacy, America has been much more introvert in recent years. Again, see the examples of Georgia, Libya and Syria. Moreover it has changed its tactics - the strategic goal remains the same (i.e. national security through power maximization and expansion of global control and containment) but available means have been reevaluated and foreign policy reconfigured. Such examples can be seen in the US increasing focus on Asia-Pacific, the containment of China, as well as the diplomatic approach to the Iranian nuclear program. The US cannot be everywhere at the same time, it has fallen back - at least for now. Moreover, the costs of engagement have increased radically given the rise of other great powers and the, at least regional, consolidation of their control and influence.

The above mentioned bring us to another conclusion. Nation-states are still the primary actors that drive the dynamics of the international system - be it as representatives of a nation or, perhaps more accurately, as anchors of corporate and elite interests. Indeed, we've spoken elsewhere of the privatization of politics, we can today safely speak of the *privatization of foreign policy*. Privatization and, therefore, the surrendering of national capabilities and interests to private hands are inherent in the Capitalist system. And that is why geopolitical struggles could be looked at as intra-systemic antitheses and

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7 Ibid., 135.

contradictions - even though they shouldn’t be downgraded to that alone. Further, it is obvious that economic or other cooperation cannot always or completely eliminate threat perceptions and identity motivations. Jennifer Sterling-Folker illuminatingly writes,

“(…)states can perceive each other as security threats despite increased economic interdependence between them, because nationalism and capitalism are not behavioral, analytical, or practical contradictions. Global capitalism has always functioned and will continue to function in a context of national collectives with internal competitive dynamics that make the “interdependent-peace-dividend” a phenomenon in name only.”

This is particularly true when it comes to the case of the US and Russia. After the Soviet Union dissolved Russia became a full blown capitalist state – analyses that call Putin a neo-Stalinist or explain Russia in socialist terms are off the point. In 1994 Russia even found its way to cooperation with the US and the West through the NATO-led program “Partnership for Peace;” a number of important agreements of cooperation were signed while in 2002 the NATO-Russia Council was established. However, this did not prevent Russia from (militarily) opposing NATO’s expansion towards the east. In fact, it never saw NATO’s relationship with Georgia, or the rest of its “near abroad,” positively, rather suspiciously.

To conclude, the general reality that occurs from these lines and needs to be highlighted is that the will of the strongest prevails (whoever that may be) at the expense of the weak. In the process, the social, economic and culture damage is incalculable – it has been for centuries. War in itself is not to blame, for it is human beings behind every disastrous decision. Human beings are also the victims of every act of greed and power-maximization policies. The immoral nature of politics and social relations dominates; and it is highly questionable whether this will ever change.

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9 Jennifer Sterling-Folker, “Neoclassical Realism and Identity: Peril Despite Profit Across the Taiwan Strait,” in Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy, ed. Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 104.


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